



Public Relations in Consultancy Practice: Empirical Insights from Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study on the nature of Public Relations (PR) in consultancy practice. The qualitative study specifically focused on case studies of three top PR management consultancies in Ghana. Drawing on the excellence theory as framework, the study involved in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of corporate communication managers from the three consultancies and review of corporate documents. The results suggest that the nature and dynamics of PR services provided in the three consultancies were similar although there were some notable variations in practice relative to patterns of work, account processes and fee structures. There were skilled professionals in the consultancies who offer a vast range of managerial PR services, predominantly on reputation management issues both offline and online, in addition to other technical functions. The study also established that the consultancies build strategic alliances and relationships with global holding companies to improve their competitive positioning and also create a wider network of diverse clientele. There is evidence that the consulting part of PR is currently booming. However, research on PR in consultancy practice has largely been neglected in the mainstream PR scholarship. The findings of the study, therefore, have implications for consulting firms recruiting PR professionals as well as consultants focusing on PR strategies and campaigns for their clients. The study also offers critical reflections on how PR strategies can effectively contribute to consultancy knowledge and practice beyond the Western context. The findings are original since no such research has previously been explored in Ghana.

Keywords: Public Relations, PR consultancy, Consultancy practice, Consultancy services, Ghana

INTRODUCTION

Since its modern outset in the early part of the 20th century, Public Relations (PR) has developed into a multi-billion-dollar industry which was worth 88 billion US Dollars as of the year 2020, and expected to exceed 129 Billion Dollars by 2025 (Statista, 2022). According to the International Communications Consultancy Organisation (ICCO) World PR Report (2021-2022), the growth of the PR market has been bolstered by globalisation, technological

advancements, partnerships, talent sourcing, profit margins and strong institutional structures. There is evidence that due to global integration, PR practice now extends across countries with varied cultures, economic and political systems, and stages of maturity (Amo-Mensah and Tench 2018; Jackson *et. al.* 2022). The UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) conceptualises PR within the context of reputation, thus, 'Public relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you' (CIPR, 2022). Indeed, this definition does not only highlight the basic principles of modern PR in regard to building mutually beneficial relationships and trust; it also accentuates the significant role of PR in reputation management or PR as a strategic communication management function that aims to develop and maintain a positive image of an organisation (Bowen *et. al.* 2019).

There are observations indicating that PR origins and evolution heralded the birth of PR consultancies and the successful growth of the industry as significant to the expansion of the PR field as a whole (Pieczka, 2008). In her work on history of PR, L'Etang (2004) dedicated a chapter on the rise of PR consultancies, and observed that the emergence of a growing number of state-of-the-art consultancies around the world signal a unique development in PR professionalisation. Today, PR consultancies range from full-service consultancies to specialists who provide solutions to a wide range of communication problems (or fill a particular organisational or client need) and vary from units of larger umbrella organisations to individually owned consultancies (Verčič *et. al.* 2018). The extant literature emphasises that due to the many strategic benefits of working as a PR consultant, including exposure, diversity of work and new job possibilities, there is a general trend towards more specialisations in the field to offer advice and expertise to clients and to support organisational development (e.g. Johansen, 2017). In Ghana, economic liberalisation has engineered the PR consultancy industry. These consultancies perform specific PR functions for organisations that may either be too small to set up in-house PR departments or big organisations requiring the consultancy to perform specific functions they may need assistance with. Like many other countries, Ghana currently has many consultancies providing PR and communication-related advisory services. These include Ogilvy Ghana, Touchpoint Magna Carta, Global Media Alliance, Strategic Communications Africa Limited (StratComm. Africa) and Mahogany Consult. The Institute of Public Relations (IPR), Ghana, the national PR professional body, provides education, training, and accreditation opportunities to practitioners and has helped develop professionalism in the industry since its inception in 1992. According to Yue (2019), professional and academic training are the main determinants that accelerate institutionalisation of PR to increase the number of highly trained professionals in the industry.

On the other hand, research suggests that consulting has become an important component of the PR industry, which points to the need for more empirical investigations in that area (ICCO World PR Report 2021-2022; Wright, 2013). Even though there is evidence that the consulting part of PR is currently booming, research on PR in consultancy practice has largely been neglected in the mainstream PR scholarship (Verčič *et. al.* 2018). According to Verčič *et. al.* (2018), PR consultancies are an indispensable component of the PR industry, therefore, they deserve more attention from researchers - about why they exist, how they operate, and how they enter into business relationships with their clients. The researchers further noted that in contrast to advertising agencies, PR consultancies are understudied in PR research. Other scholars (e.g. Frandsen *et. al.* 2013; Johansen, 2017) have also found that, in comparison to

other consultancy fields such as management and marketing, academic literature on PR consultancies is scarce, which calls for more research on PR consultancies' role in the industry.

A review of the literature highlights a few studies on the operations of PR consultancy firms (e.g. Bashir and Fedorova, 2014; Daymon, 2000; Lages and Simkin 2003; Preciado-Hoyos, 2020; Verčič *et. al.* 2018; White, 2000, 2002; Wright, 2013). However, most of these studies were conducted within the Western context. For instance, Wright (2013) provided an overview of the PR consultancy industry in the United States, focusing on their development, structure, services, fees, and clients. The results showed that PR consultancies in the US operated as independent firms, with some partnering with advertising agencies. Daymon (2000), drawing data from PR practitioners operating in consultancies in the UK, also explored how creativity and innovation are integrated in PR consultancies. The study found that the extent of creativity and innovation is influenced by the nature of the consultancy, its size and clientele base. The study concludes that creative and innovative solutions are key to consultancy growth strategy. Besides, literature has established that South Africa leads in terms of studies on PR practice in Africa (Ngondo and Klyueva, 2020). In line with this observation, Wu and Baah-Boakye (2014) postulated that with the exception of South Africa, and in recent times Nigeria, research on PR practice in other African cultures has not been given much attention by academics and scholars. On their part, Anani-Bossman and Bruce (2021) specifically noted that “discussions on international PR practice are lopsided and are mainly skewed towards Western, and in part Asian perspectives” (p. 130). They further lamented that, “in the case of Ghana, the situation is even more serious as there is very little information on the nature of PR practice” (Anani-Bossman and Bruce (2021, p.130). Considering the very few PR discussions that focus on Ghana, giving way for Western conceptualisations and ideologies, Anani-Bossman and Mudzanani, in a study in 2020, advocated for a descriptive account of PR practice from individual countries, such as Ghana, to enhance the body of knowledge currently in existence.

It is important to emphasise that attempts to examine the current body of literature on PR in Ghana revealed some notable studies. These studies have mostly looked at in-house PR practices (e.g. Anani-Bossman, 2021; Gyan, 1991; Wu and Baah-Boakye, 2008). Other studies have examined issues related to PR education and professionalisation (e.g. Amoakohene, 2015; Amo-Mensah, 2018; Thompson, 2018; Wu and Baah-Boakye, 2008, 2014), globalisation and PR practice (e.g. Anani-Bossman and Bruce, 2021) and theoretical frameworks for PR practice (e.g. Anani-Bossman and Mudzanani, 2020; Anani-Bossman and Tandoh, 2022). Within the context of consultancies, no such PR research has previously been explored in Ghana. The focus of this paper, therefore, is to respond to calls for more research on PR practice in Ghana, and in particular, provide empirical insights into PR and consultancy practice in Ghana. Drawing on the excellence theory of PR as framework, the study focused on case studies of three top PR management consultancies in Ghana: Ogilvy Ghana, Touchpoint Magna Carta Ghana and Global Media Alliance. The study contributes to research in PR consultancy practice, a domain that is underexplored in the PR management literature. The findings have implications for consulting firms recruiting PR professionals as well as consultants focusing on PR strategies and campaigns for their clients. At the same time, it offers critical reflections on how PR strategies can effectively contribute to consultancy knowledge and practice beyond the Western context. In the remainder of the paper, we first discuss the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of the study, followed by the methodological procedures. We then present the findings and discussion, after which conclusions are drawn.

PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE AND CONSULTANCIES

Research suggests that in the PR industry, practitioners either work in-house or in consultancy (Verčič *et. al.* 2018). While PR departments are integrated into organisations, PR consultancies provide autonomous and contracted services to third parties, who are mainly companies, institutions, governments and individuals (Estanyol and Lalueza, 2014). These consultancies normally have experts offering effective and efficient counsel to clients or utilising their expertise to strategically address communication-related issues for clients (Verčič *et. al.* 2018). Various scholars (e.g. Wilcox *et. al.* 2015) prefer the term 'consultancy' or 'consulting' rather than 'agency' to depict the practices of PR consultancies as a differentiation mark from advertising agencies and as a shift from the traditional press agency model as proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984). Broom and Sha (2013) confirmed that in the early 1980s, most PR agencies modified their names to PR firms or consultancies to inform the PR market and businesses of their shift from publicity to counseling and to distinguish the practice of PR from advertising. According to Verčič (2012), the continuity and success of the consultancy business calls for building long-term mutual relationships with clients.

In line with Verčič's (2012) viewpoint, the excellence theory identifies principles of PR that contribute to organisational effectiveness and excellence at the programme, functional, organisational and societal levels (Dozier *et. al.* 1995). The theory, which evolved out of a 15-year study, basically suggests how PR should be managed (for example, as a critical management function, as an integrated communication function with senior practitioners playing managerial roles, as open two-way communication and as ethical) for best outcomes (Grunig *et. al.* 2006). As the dominant normative paradigm in PR, the excellence theory has been utilised by scholars across cultures and in different types of organisations. For instance, Verčič and Zerfass (2016) studied 3,691 communication departments across Europe drawing on the excellence framework. Similarly, Zahra and Balushi (2017) used the excellence theory to explore how PR is practiced in consultancies in the Sultanate of Oman. In Ghana, Anani-Bossman (2021) examined the extent to which organisations practice strategic PR particularly in relation to the manager-technician dichotomy. Drawing on the excellence theory, the findings revealed that, in general, PR professionals played technical roles more than managerial roles. The study also links cultural factors to the practice of PR in Ghana. In their study on PR consultancies in Europe, Verčič *et. al.* (2018) argued that the future of the PR consultancy market is reliant on how expedient practitioners gain knowledge on excellent PR to meet the expectations of clients.

Drawing insights from the excellence concept and in their quest to determine the quality of PR consulting services, a survey by Mompaler *et. al.* (2015) examined the structure of 54 PR consultancies in Spain, particularly concentrating on how satisfaction levels of consulting clients impact how they perceive fee rates. The results showed that the nature, size and specialisation of PR consultancies influence their structure and hierarchy. The study also established a positive relationship between client satisfaction (based on the value of consulting services rendered) and consulting fees. It also emerged that consultancies in Spain offer integrated communication services to remain competitive. On the contrary, Moss *et. al.* (2017) found a somewhat different finding in regard to the relationship between organisational structure and organisational size. In a global survey of 278 communication managers in various organisational sectors across five continents (Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America and North America), Moss *et. al.* (2017) established that there were different structural configurations

that were not dependent on size but what works best for the organisations in managing their communication functions most effectively. Wright's (2013) study in the United States similarly found structural differences in consultancies across countries with subsidiaries that tend to adopt country-specific structures. Relating the structure and position of PR in organisations in the Ghanaian context, Gyan (1991) observed that the location of PR in the organisational structure depended on how the top management hierarchy understands the PR function. In other studies, White (2000) addressed innovation, research and development in PR consultancies in the UK. Another study by White (2002) reports on a study that targeted fee-setting practices or rates charged by PR consulting firms, also in the UK. Preciado-Hoyos (2020) assessed the views of directors of PR consultancies in Colombia on strategic communication and how it relates to consultancy activities. The author interviewed fifty-five (55) consultancy directors and surveyed 1,200 communications professionals. The study found that Columbian consultancies offer technical services in addition to core consultancy advisory services. In Egypt, El-Aidy (2015) found that PR consultancies have incorporated new media platforms including websites, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram and GooglePlus in their operations and communications. Similarly, Triantafillou and Yannas (2014) observed that PR consultancies in Greece widely incorporate digital media in clients' communication campaigns. On their part, Lages and Simkin (2003) emphasised the underlying driving forces of PR consultancy practice.

In Ghana, the few studies on PR practice, as indicated earlier, have focused on areas other than consultancy practice. For example, Anani-Bossman and Tandoh (2022) reviewed PR theories (in Africa) within the context of globalisation and proposed an African-based PR framework that reflects contextual peculiarities. Additionally, a qualitative study by Anani-Bossman and Mudzanani (2020) investigated how PR is practiced in the financial services sector in Ghana. Drawing on data collected from twenty-two practitioners, the study found that professionals working in the financial services sector had no training in PR and therefore did not engage in strategic PR for the practice to get the needed attention it deserves. The study further observed that PR in Ghana had been shaped by Western conceptualisations and ideologies, consistent with the findings by Thompson (2018). In tandem with the observation by Anani-Bossman and Tandoh (2022), Anani-Bossman and Mudzanani (2020) likewise suggested a framework for excellent PR practice. Another qualitative study by Anani-Bossman and Bruce (2021) delved into the impact of globalisation on the practice of PR in Ghana. Findings from the study suggest that PR has significantly been affected by the processes of globalisation opening up new and unexplored opportunities within the PR field. The authors also highlighted the dark sides or negative implications of globalisation, prompting companies to develop and leverage technological infrastructure to advance a shift from the ways in which PR has traditionally been practiced.

From the perspectives of PR educators, Thompson (2018) examined the role of PR education and how the curricula for the education of PR students potentially shape careers of students in the workplace. The findings revealed that even though the PR curricula somewhat reflect the needs of the profession, a more robust PR education has the potential to spearhead professionalism in PR practice in Ghana. Amo-Mensah (2018) examined students' perspectives of the relationship between PR and Marketing and proposes a conceptual framework that highlights similarities and differences between the two management disciplines. A survey by Wu and Baah-Boakye (2014) drew data from sixty-four PR practitioners to assess PR

professionalisation and the impacts of globalisation on PR practice in Ghana. The findings highlighted various dimensions of professionalisation in PR in Ghana, including the presence of a PR professional association and practitioner research. A similar quantitative study by Wu and Baah-Boakye (2009) dwelled on how PR has evolved in Ghana, focusing on practitioner models and professionalism issues. The study further examined the role of culture in PR and how culture and values, as social constructs, drive organisational PR in Ghana. An earlier survey by Wu and Baah-Boakye (2008) analysed various dimensions of PR practice in Ghana including practitioner roles; the most important skills needed for a career in PR; the relationship between PR and other communication functions; gender-based issues in PR; and, the future of PR in Ghana. The findings indicated that PR practitioners in Ghana have strategic organisational decision-making capabilities. Interpersonal communication was found to be the most important skill needed to become effective PR professional in Ghana.

Clearly, the review above shows that many of the studies in the literature on PR in consultancy practice have focused on the Western world. No study however exists on the phenomenon in the Ghanaian context. Based on the above gaps highlighted, this study draws on the excellence theory to examine the practices of PR in three top PR management consultancies (Ogilvy Ghana, Touchpoint Magna Carta Ghana and Global Media Alliance) in Ghana. The central questions addressed in this study are:

1. What is the nature of PR in the three consultancies: Ogilvy Ghana, Touchpoint Magna Carta Ghana and Global Media Alliance?
2. What are the roles and functions of PR in the three consultancies: Ogilvy Ghana, Touchpoint Magna Carta Ghana and Global Media Alliance?

METHODOLOGY

This study examines how three top management consultancies in Ghana: Ogilvy Ghana, Touchpoint Magna Carta Ghana and Global Media Alliance integrate PR practices in their consulting activities. The study employed qualitative research approach in view of the depth of information needed for the purpose of exploration. Lindlof and Taylor (2017) intimated that to gain detailed information on a phenomenon, a researcher must conduct a qualitative study accompanied by in-depth interviews, where the actual meaning of the information obtained, is more valuable than being able to generalise it. Creswell (2014) also asserts that the “qualitative approach helps the researcher to explore and understand meanings individuals or groups assign to a social or human problem” (p. 32). In line with this, the study used qualitative approach because of its exploratory nature in order to understand the meanings the participants assigned to their actions on the nature of PR practice in the consultancies studied. Studies in the extant literature have relied on qualitative approaches to examine PR practices of firms (e.g. Anani-Bossman and Bruce, 2021; El-Aidy, 2015; Estanyol and Lalueza, 2014; Smith and Place, 2013). Considering their experiences and in-depth knowledge of the topic under study, Twelve (12) senior level PR practitioners comprising four participants drawn from each consultancy were purposively selected from the three consultancies in Accra, Ghana. In Ogilvy Ghana, the researchers selected the PR Director, the PR Manager, a PR Account Manager, and a PR Account Executive. Participants from Touchpoint Magna Carta Ghana were the PR Team Lead, the PR Manager, a Senior PR Executive, and a PR Executive. From Global Media Alliance, the researchers selected the PR Group Head, the PR Manager, the PR Account Manager and a PR Account Executive. The three consultancies were purposefully selected because they are all top management consultancies and IPR Ghana Excellence award winners. Ogilvy Ghana is a full

service consultancy affiliated to Ogilvy Worldwide & WPP Scangroup and it won the most outstanding IPR Ghana best consultancy award in 2018; Touchpoint Magna Carta Ghana is a full service consultancy affiliated to Magna Carta, South Africa, and NINANI Group, Ghana, and it was adjudged the best consultancy award by IPR Ghana in 2019; and, Global Media Alliance is an integrated international communications consultancy affiliated to Weber Shandwick and Fleishman – Hillard. The organisation won the most outstanding consultancy IPR Ghana award in 2013, 2015 and 2016. Again, all the participants selected practice PR in their respective consultancies and are members of the national PR professional body, IPR, Ghana.

The study employed multiple case study as the researchers sought to investigate how the PR practitioners in the three selected consultancies practice PR, looking at roles and functions within and across cases to highlight similarities and differences. Many researchers have adopted the case study design to examine how PR is practiced in consultancies (e.g. Estanyol and Lalueza, 2014; Johansen, 2017). Yin (2018) averred that qualitative case study researchers utilise multiple data sources to generate insights. This study therefore involved both in-depth interviews with the corporate communication managers/executives from the three consultancies and review of corporate documents, including speeches, brochures and articles. The data gathered from the two sources were integrated and analysed based on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) six-step approach to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis has been adopted by many communication researchers to make sense of qualitative data (e.g. Amo-Mensah, 2018; Crane and Glozer, 2016). Instead of real names, the study adopted pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities (for example, OG 1, 2, 3, 4 for participants from Ogilvy Ghana; TMC 1, 2, 3, 4 for those in Touchpoint Magna Carta; and GMA 1, 2, 3, 4 for those in Global Media Alliance). The next section presents and analyses the results of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Nature of pr practice

On the nature of PR practice in Ogilvy Ghana (OG), Touchpoint Magna Carta (TMC) and Global Media Alliance (GMA), six thematic areas emerged from the data. These include *Structure of the PR Consultancies*, *Education and Professionalism*, *Services*, *Fee Structure*, *Strategic Relationships*, and *Diverse Clientele*.

Structure of the Consultancies

The findings revealed that OG and GMA operated functional account organisational structures, with a bit of bureaucratic reporting relationships. TMC on the other hand operates a simple account team structure which allowed for easy flow of information within and outside the consultancy. The functional structure revealed that the consultancy functions with expert staff on different aspects of PR, including reputation management, content management and event planning. The account team structure on the other hand operates with a team of employees working with different clients with shared interests. The data further showed that consultancy size, type and expertise determined the organisational structure similar to the findings by Mompaler *et. al.* (2015) but contrary to the results by Moss *et. al.* (2017). According to the analysis, all the three consultancies operate well-defined organisational structures based on their sizes, types and expertise. OG and GMA were identified as larger consultancies with varied expertise, offering more specialised services and having wider global presence as compared to TMC, which is smaller in size and providing limited services. These factors contributed to the variations in the consultancies' organisational charts, as also established by Wright (2013). This

finding on the use of different structures in the consultancies confirms Estanyol and Lalueza's (2014) observations in their study on how PR consultancies in Spain are structured and organised internally.

With reference to the structure and position of PR in the consultancies, the findings established that the PR senior managers in OG and TMC are placed in top management positions and are part of decision-making processes. This finding is in line with studies by O'Dwyer (2005) and Wu and Baah-Boakye (2008) that also found that practitioners were involved in top management decision-making. In GMA, however, the Head of PR was not positioned in top management but was sometimes involved in decision-making processes when necessary. He noted: *"...although I report to the Chief Director, I sometimes get the opportunity to be part of the decision-making process because of my expertise in the PR field..."* (GMA 1). This substantiates Berger's (2005) assertion that PR managers may be involved in the shifting decision-making coalition when their expertise is pertinent to a decision. Grunig and Dozier (2002) liken this to power within organisations, with formal power depicted by hierarchical reporting relationships and informal power having to do with the practitioner gaining significance for expertise, valuable counsel or having a positive relationship with the dominant coalition. Nevertheless, the excellence theory highlights a management status for senior PR practitioners to help create strategic value for PR departments and consultancies (Dozier *et. al.* 1995).

Education and Professionalism

The findings established that the PR practitioners working in the consultancies have the required academic qualifications in PR and communication-related fields. All the staff in the three consultancies have a minimum of a Bachelor's Degree (particularly the Junior staff) or postgraduate qualifications (the Senior Practitioners). For example, in OG, the senior managers have postgraduate qualifications while the Junior Executives are Bachelor Degree holders. A participant from the organisation remarked: *"...we have nine members of staff, four have postgraduate degrees in communication and marketing, while the five junior executives are first degree holders in communication studies..."* (OG2). Similar trends were found in TMC and GMA. Another participant from TMC commented, *"our PR staff are made up of first and second degree holders in communication studies, in areas such as PR, Advertising and Marketing"* (TMC 1). At GMA, the staff have varied qualifications that include MBA in Marketing, and MA and BA in Communications Studies. Most of the participants indicated that consultancy work demands highly specialised skills to handle clients' work so without in-depth knowledge on PR acquired through formal education, it would be difficult for practitioners to operate in a consultancy. A participant for instance stated that, in *"Global Media, emergency issues arise that need prompt critical thinking so if you're not highly trained professionally to handle such issues, you can't work in the consultancy industry"* (GMA, 2). This finding corroborates Mompaler *et. al.*'s (2015) study which established that a firm's competent workforce is its main value; and the basis of advisory service in consultancy practice is the practitioner's knowledge and professional competence. The literature further suggests that, to ensure excellent performance in the field of PR (as championed by the Excellence theory), practitioners must possess sound educational backgrounds in PR or communications (Seitel, 2019). Thompson (2018) rightly notes that the basis for any profession such as PR is its professional education, a key component in every true profession. The participants, however, elucidated that even though the basic foundation of PR consultancy work is formal education, experience is also important for a successful PR consultancy career.

The analysis further revealed that all the three PR consultancies are corporate members of IPR Ghana and the Public Relations Consultancy Association in the UK. It also emerged that all staff of the three consultancies were members of the IPR, Ghana. In addition, some practitioners were members of leading global PR professional bodies such as the International Public Relations Association. For instance, the data revealed that the PR Business Lead and PR Director at OG, the Team Lead and Senior Executives of TMC, and the Group Head and Assistant Head of GMA are all members of IPRA. This revelation shows that these three consultancies are committed to professional standards and have taken steps to join efforts advance the field and as well connect with members of the industry. Wu and Baah-Boakye (2014) and Yue (2019) suggest that PR professionalism can be determined by education, specialised training and professional involvement, among other aspects. The participants further revealed that they receive network support and on-the-job training through workshops and seminars, which sometimes even benefit their clients. All the participants emphasised the importance of these trainings because of the dynamic nature of the PR profession and digitalisation within the field in recent times. The participants suggested that due to technological advancements, they needed to be abreast of emerging trends to enable them function effectively in the digital world. Fresh graduates are taken through seminars and workshops to develop themselves further and gain the needed experience for consultancy work. Lages and Simkin (2003) note that, PR professional bodies are particularly well-positioned to offer practitioner training and education in the field.

Services

From the analysis, the nature and dynamics of PR services provided in the three consultancies were similar although there were some notable variations in practice in relation to patterns of work. The consultancies offer a vast range of customised high quality managerial PR services, predominantly on reputation management issues both offline and online, in addition to other technical services. The data revealed two main services provided by the consultancies: strategic services (usually handled by high level executives, including but not limited to counseling, strategic integration, reputation management and stakeholder engagements) and operational services (the daily services provided for clients and sometimes within the consultancy in areas such as content creation and writing). Hoyo (2020) discovered similar finding in a study on Columbian consultancies that offer strategic PR services such as counselling in addition to technical services. Specifically, services in OG included stakeholder engagements, reputation management, media relations, executive profiling, content management, branded PR, CSR, issues and crisis management, and events planning. Participants from TMC emphasised particularly reputation management, events management, media buying, stakeholder relations, community relations, strategy development, crisis communication and management as the services the consultancy renders. In the case of GMA, participants averred that the services they engage in include crisis communication, media relations, stakeholder engagement, media monitoring and reporting, editorial duties (e.g. press releases, features, speeches), drafting of plans, media management, stakeholder engagement, advocacy and counseling. According to the data, the services enumerated by the participants were specialised and full service, particularly directed towards fulfilling clients' needs and achieving the consultancies' goals of increased Return on Investment (ROI). This is consistent with the excellence theory, which espouses how PR aids the effectiveness of organisations in the determination of the value of PR (Dozier *et. al.* 1995).

Although the data revealed similarities in the services provided by the three consultancies, there were some differences dependent on the consultancy involved. The evidence showed that in order to gain competitive advantage in the PR consultancy market (the three consultancies were in competition), each consultancy provided a unique service or sometimes had to rebrand its services to meet clients' needs. Consistent with the findings by Mompaler *et. al.* (2015) in Spain, OG had *branded PR* as its unique service; TMC had *government and organisational workshops on crisis communication* as their unique service; while GMA had *advocacy and strategic integration* as their distinct service. Moreover, all three consultancies emphasised reputation management as the principal service and clients' most requested service. For example, in OG, much emphasis was laid on reputation management because it was seen as key in promoting clients' brands. In the case of TMC, reputation management was its foundation. On the other hand, GMA viewed reputation management in relation to the services provided. "PR is important to Ogilvy in managing the image of our clients to ensure that their brands have consistent positive reputation as well as our consultancy" (OG, 4); "...To us at Touchpoint, PR is helping to manage the reputation of our clients..." (TMC, 3); "...In Global Media our services have to do with the whole gamut of reputation management ..." (GMA, 3) were some of the responses from the participants. This finding underscores CIPR's (2022) apt description of PR as the discipline in charge of corporate reputation.

Fee Structure

The findings revealed the type of fee structure used by each of the three consultancies, how fees were determined and the amount charged. The analysis established that OG, TMC and GMA employed similar fee structures with slight variations in fee determination and amount charged. Generally, the data identified service charges, retainer fees, project fees for retained clients and retainer plus hours fee structures in the three consultancies. The data suggest standard rates of service charges, an agreed monthly or quarterly retainer fee for fixed schedule of PR activities or an agreed (between the client and the consultancy) project fee for retained clients. Fees were basically determined based on the scope of work, resources required including composition of staff in the execution of the work and time spent on the work: "...In Ogilvy, fees are determined using a standard rate card which states a fixed rate for each category of service provided across board...and the fees depend on the scope of work..." (OG 1); "At Touchpoint, our fees are determined based on the scope of assignment and resources allocated to same. Our rates are not fixed..." (TMC, 2); "In Global Media, our fees are calculated based on the scope of work and dependent on the KPI's of the job..." (GMA 4). White (2002) also found that PR consultancy fees are based on the nature of the work to be undertaken and profit requirements. As indicated, the three PR consultancies determine their fees primarily based on the scope of work but their fee structures and amount charged varied. Although OG determined its fees based on the services provided, it uses the fixed rate system with all charges inclusive for a specific service notwithstanding the category of client. For instance, the rate card given to a client for media relations may include pitching of stories, writing press releases, among others. The addition or reduction of the activities within each PR activity either increases or decreases the scope of work, thus reducing the fee to be charged. TMC on the other hand sets its fees on the basis of resources and time spent on the work, in addition to the scope of the work. The data, however, indicated that GMA determined its fees, taking into consideration the scope of work and resources allocated. The data also revealed that the fees they charged were mostly retainer charges with a few project-based fees since they have clients who come in for full service while others request specific services. The data also discovered that services for clients

including stakeholder engagement, crisis management, and reputation management attracted higher fees in the three consultancies.

Strategic Relationships

On strategic relationships, the study indicated that all three consultancies are affiliated to top global holding consultancies or publicly traded companies who have acquired several consultancies in the US, UK and other parts of world (Wright, 2013). According to Wright (2013) these holding companies sometimes merge to gain competitive advantage and the largest of such conglomerates are the WPP Group and Omnicom Group, Fleishman-Hillard and Ketchum Group. The data revealed that all the consultancies are into mutually beneficial relationships with such global holding companies who impact how they practice PR in their consultancies. OG is a “*wholly-owned subsidiary of Ogilvy Worldwide & WPP Scangroup*” (OG, 3); TMC is an indigenous Ghanaian communications consultancy affiliated to Magna Carta in South Africa, which is an African affiliate of the Global Ketchum Group. This means that TMC is a Ghanaian-grown consultancy that partnered with the South African conglomerate which is also an affiliate of the global holding group. TMC 4 states, “*Touchpoint’s affiliation with Magna Carta gives it access to Magna Carta Africa and its global networks as well as their intellectual property and senior consultants*”. Moreover, GMA is one of the locally owned PR and Media consultancies in Ghana, affiliated to Weber Shandwick and Fleishman-Hillard. This affiliation has expanded GMA’s reach, helping them to venture into diverse aspects of consultancy and media work, “*...GMA’s partnership with Weber Shandwick and Fleishman-Hillard is a mutual one, a win-win affair. We help them gain access to the African market while we also access the global market...*” (GMA, 2). The finding is in consonance with the study of American PR consultancies by Bashir and Fedorova (2014) that established that most PR consultancies join conglomerates worldwide in their quest to gain competitive advantage and create wider networks. These conglomerates expand their holdings by acquiring other companies in related or unrelated fields (Bashir and Fedorova, 2014). According to the data, the strategic relationships the consultancies have forged with top global holding consultancies have made them stronger brands in Ghana and beyond. The excellence theory affirms that PR practitioners must recognise strategic publics and build long-term mutual relationships with them (Grunig *et. al.* 2006).

Clientele

The affiliation of the consultancies with top global companies places them in a better position to attract and retain diverse clientele including multinational companies. The data showed that the more prestigious a consultancy’s clients are, the more value it has in the PR market. OG listed top clients such as MTN Ghana, Vodafone, Coca-Cola, Guinness Ghana, KFC, Huawei, ABSA, Stanbic, Kosmos Energy, UNICEF, MultiChoice Ghana and GCB Bank. Likewise, participants from TMC named Stanbic, a member of the Standard Bank Group, MTN Ghana, Tullow Ghana and Enterprise Group as some of their clients. On the other hand, participants from GMA mentioned Bank of Ghana, Stanbic, Ecobank, Fidelity Bank, GCB Bank, MTN, Vodafone, Samsung, DSTV, Huawei, Startimes, Tullow Ghana, Ghana National Petroleum Company (GNPC), Vivo Energy and South African Airways as some of their clients. It emerged that sometimes the three consultancies handled same clients but on different service offerings. Insights from the data suggest that OG for instance provides MTN with content management services, where they tell a story on the MTN mobile money services/franchise. TMC on the other hand offers PR Strategies for MTN such as product launches while GMA provides media relations services to

MTN. In the same vein, OG handles CSR for Stanbic, which they term branded PR. TMC does leadership profiling for Stanbic and GMA provides Stanbic with crisis communication services. It was further discovered that the relationship among the consultancies and their clients was very important in determining how the consultancies attract, retain and sustain clients. As Verčič *et. al.* (2018) note, the relationship between a consultancy and its clients signifies a strategic partnership that can have a major effect on both parties. The data disclosed that OG, TMC and GMA form teams that handle clients according to their expertise in a particular area. Participants noted that consultancies require professionalism in dealing with clients, as well as having detailed knowledge about clients and their activities. OG, for instance, based its relationship with its clients on teamwork, processes and acquisition of in-depth knowledge on client companies and their operations in providing quality services in due time. Similarly, TMC also has a team with the requisite knowledge and competencies, who follow due process in relating with clients to offer top-notch services within the timelines. GMA on the other hand uses dedicated teams in managing clients. These teams ensure that every brief on each job is verified to equip them with in-depth knowledge to deliver excellent services. Lages and Simkin (2003) found that the scope of a consultancy's PR practice depended largely on the number and quality of clients it manages.

ROLES AND FUNCTIONS

In looking at the roles and functions of the three consultancies, the data focused on two key areas: duties and responsibilities and integrated PR function.

Duties and Responsibilities

The data gathered showed that due to the dynamic nature of PR practice in the consultancies, the practitioners performed various managerial, strategic and technical roles at varied levels and capacities in the consultancies. One participant from GMA remarked: *"...consultancy work is not static, it is dynamic so our roles and responsibilities keep changing..."* (GMA, 3). From the findings, it was revealed that one practitioner could work in different roles for several clients concurrently. This simultaneous role-play was usually undertaken by senior practitioners who have knowledge and could fit in all the roles. One participant from TMC disclosed that *"a practitioner may take on a more managerial role for one client or a technician role for another"* (TMC, 1). Another participant from OG affirmed that he sometimes plays *"different roles for different clients depending on what their jobs entailed"* (OG, 3). This finding affirms the role theory of PR which implies that in-house PR practitioners' roles are more stable than the changing roles of consultants due to the diverse nature of their clients (Dozier *et. al.* 1995; Grunig and Dozier, 2002). The data, for instance, revealed that the technician PR role within the consultancies is a specialised role, with PR managers functioning in that role. This makes the performance of the technician role in consultancies different from in-house practice, where junior staff usually perform basic functions such as writing, editing, press cuttings and press clippings, among others (Seitel, 2019).

The data also indicated differences in the dominant roles performed by each consultancy. For instance, practitioners in GMA played more technician roles than managerial roles consistent with the findings by Anani- Bossman (2021). Perhaps the fact that the PR head of GMA was not part of the dominant coalition (but have access to Senior management) may have accounted for this finding. The data revealed that practitioners who function in the technician role mostly engage in media relations as well as creating or managing media content for clients. The

dominant media activities in the organisation is usually undertaken by the assistant head of PR and the account executives, “...we typically do media monitoring and reporting, editorial duties, drafting of plans and media management...” (GMA, 4). The head of PR is the only practitioner who played managerial roles with support from the other team members. The head of PR averred that he “supervises staff and activities in the PR unit, handles crisis, stakeholder engagement, reputation management, coordinate media and roll out campaigns for clients” (GMA 3). Even though the head of PR is not part of the dominant coalition, the performance of managerial role gives him access to top management and an opportunity to sometimes make input in decisions. This finding accentuates Yue’s (2019) observation that management recognised knowledge for the managerial role which is more essential for top-level decision-making as compared to the technician role. Despite the fact that the managerial role was more valued by management, it was found that the media activities undertaken within the technician role were the most requested for services that brought in more money for increased return on investment. OG, on the other hand, adopted predominantly the strategic role as championed by the Excellence theory. The findings indicated that the PR Business Lead and PR Director who are senior managers are part of the dominant coalition and play strategic roles. These managers sometimes supported or functioned in the technician role, especially in media relations and media management. This finding is consistent with the study by Verčič *et al.* (2018) which suggest that PR managers are now strategically drawing on their expertise to execute the media relations and media management functions. At TMC, practitioners operated in teams, with the PR Head being part of strategic management and the decision-making process. These teams, led by the PR Head, mainly functioned in the strategic and managerial roles as opposed to the technician roles, contrary to the finding by Anani-Bossman (2021).

Integrated Function

The findings showed that the three consultancies integrate all their communication activities under the PR unit. Smith and Place (2013) observed that the basis for such integration in consultancy practice is to reduce cost and achieve effective communication results. The excellence theory also highlights an integrated PR function to achieve excellence (Grunig *et al.* 2006). The data from all the three consultancies suggest that clients now request services that demand the integration of PR, advertising, digital and other creative functions. Each consultancy used a different term to describe this integration. In OG, it was termed “the 360 offering” (OG, 1); TMC referred to it as “the 360 approach” (TMC, 2); and, in GMA, “the 360 strategy” (GMA, 1). According to the data, the ‘360 degrees’ function indicates an all-round or all-inclusive PR function that encompasses different aspects of the consultancies’ offerings (PR, below-the-line, creative, digital and media buying). Grunig *et al.* (2006) emphasised that an integrated system enables PR practitioners to develop new communication programmes for strategic dynamic publics. Unlike OG and GMA, TMC partners with its sister consultancies, Result and INNOVA DDB, within the NINANI Group to execute the integrated function. Result and INNOVA DDB are advertising and digital consultancies situated in different buildings in the same enclave where TMC is located: According to TMC, 4, “... if a 360 approach project is being handled within the NINANI Group, we all brainstorm as a team and come up various strategies and tactics”. Insights from OG suggest that when a project requires a 360 offering, a team of experts is gathered from the various units to develop strategies and allocate responsibilities among the team members. In GMA, “we put our best foot forward by engaging our teams from all the functional units in implementing clients’ communication campaigns...”, was a response from one of the participants (GMA, 2).

According to the data, even though the three consultancies integrate digital media in their clients' communication campaigns, this became more prominent at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic which caused many companies and individuals to particularly move online. In addition to the traditional communication methods, the consultancies utilise social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter), video sharing apps, websites, and blogs to execute the PR function and to interact with stakeholders, in tandem with the finding by Triantafillidou and Yannas (2014) in Greece. El-Aidy (2015), however, found that PR consultancies in Egypt used websites and social media platforms as presentational aids rather than communication tools. The participants noted that the interactive and dialogic nature of digital media make room for two-way communication and engagements. As Tench and Amo-Mensah (2018) notes, social media generate two-way interactions between practitioners and their publics or clients. On the other hand, the study revealed some challenges in the integration of PR in the consultancies. For example, participants at OG indicated that the consultancy has a commitment towards the mother firm, Ogilvy and Mather Worldwide, in terms of a percentage of their income to the mother firm. The need for the consultancy to meet quarterly financial targets puts a lot of strain on the company and negatively affects budgets and spending. It was also inferred from participants from TMC that as a member of the NINANI Group, decisions sometimes have to be in consultation with other partners. Usually, the bureaucratic consultations make it difficult for the consultancy to take on-the-spot decisions. In the case of GMA, insights from the data suggest that budget cuts from both management and clients pose PR implementation problems. The data also showed that late notice from clients and tight turn-around time for projects put a lot of pressure on the practitioners. The data gathered also pointed to issues of technological dynamism in respect of practitioners trying to catch up with changing digital trends and sophisticated digital communication tools for PR implementation.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study sought to examine how three top management consultancies in Ghana integrate PR practices in their operations. Drawing on the excellence theory as framework, the study conducted in-depth interviews with twelve purposefully selected communication managers from the three consultancies and review of corporate documents. The findings from the thematic analysis highlighted similarities and notable variations in the nature of PR services, specialisations and responsibilities in the three consultancies. The analysis also shows that the three consultancies primarily help to improve the image of their clients, using both traditional and digital media. The consultancies also invest in mutually beneficial and global partner relationships to build competitive advantage and to also establish a more diverse and strong clientele. Digitalisation has also brought about changes in the way the consultancies work. The study is one of the few to provide empirical evidence on the nature of PR in consultancy practice, a domain that has largely been neglected in the mainstream PR scholarship. The study and its findings are original since no such research has previously been explored in Ghana. Based on the prevailing knowledge gaps highlighted, the study calls attention to more theoretical and research directions on PR in consultancy practice. Future research may extend this study by looking at clients' perspectives on PR work in consultancies. It may also be interesting to compare in-house PR practices to PR consultancy practices. Other researchers may also investigate consultant-client relationships in PR consultancies, fee structures in PR consultancies, education and professionalisation issues in PR consultancies, and challenges in PR consultancy practice.

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